

Vietnam and Afghanistan: Intelligence and Ethical Failures that Doomed Two Wars

Jamison Finnamore

Helms School of Government, Liberty University

Abstract

The Vietnam War and the Afghanistan War have drawn many comparisons throughout the last two decades, most of them have been unfavorable. Both wars failed because they were prone to mission creep, and the objectives fell outside what Just War Theory allows. Both became occupations and protracted engagements, instead of clearly defined, limited objectives. In both wars, there were stark intelligence failures, and ethical misconduct by politicians and senior advisors that contributed to policy makers' and commanders' unwillingness to acknowledge the core problems. The wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan were doomed to failure because US civilian and military leaders were engaged in a culture of deceit and deference, of divided and misguided loyalties, and policy overrun by politics, resulting in an ever-deeper U.S. involvement leading to quagmires that harmed both the local populace and gravely damaged the American people.

Keywords: Vietnam, Afghanistan, politicization of intelligence, ethical failure, mission creep, foreign intervention, civil-military relations

Vietnam and Afghanistan: Intelligence and Ethical Failures that Doomed Two Wars

The Vietnam War and the Afghanistan War have drawn many comparisons throughout the last two decades, most of them have been unfavorable. The Vietnam War was predicated on the doctrine of Containment and was meant to prevent a domino effect in Southeast Asia of Communist takeover. The War in Afghanistan was of a similar doctrine. After the September 11th attacks, the Invasion of Afghanistan was meant to contain Al Qaeda and prevent the spread of international terrorism. Both wars failed because they were prone to mission creep, and the objectives fell outside what Just War Theory allows. Both became occupations and protracted engagements, instead of clearly defined, limited objectives. In both wars, there were stark intelligence failures, and ethical misconduct by politicians and senior advisors that contributed to policy makers' and commanders' unwillingness to acknowledge the core problems. These military failures mirrored general malaise and discontent on the home front, both in the 1970's and in the late 2010's and early 2020's. The wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan were doomed to failure because US civilian and military leaders were engaged in a culture of deceit and deference, of divided and misguided loyalties, and policy overrun by politics, resulting in an ever-deeper U.S. involvement leading to quagmires that harmed both the local populace and gravely damaged the American people.

The Road to War

The escalation to an all-out conflict in Vietnam began with the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 gave the United States the pretext to initiate a full-scale invasion, using the cover of self-defense to push the Containment doctrine into full force against Communism in the region (Pieper, 2012). The Gulf of Tonkin incident was two separate events, with an initial skirmish with three North Vietnamese torpedo boats, that resulted in minimal damage to the USS Maddox, and a second alleged confrontation that turned out to be false radar returns. Congress approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, based on the faulty intelligence and the claims of self-defense, despite the less than credible and murky information surrounding the second alleged incident. This failed several of the Jus Ad Bellum criteria of self-defense, proportionality, and last resort (D'Anieri, 2021). This unethical and dubious act was admitted to by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in the documentary *Fog of War*, stating that the incident for which the US authorized retaliation was fictitious (Morris, 2003). This misuse of intelligence was rationalized as part of a "greater good" of containing Communism in the region. Fear of Communism overrunning the South compelled Congress and policymakers to overlook the flimsy evidence, unethical justifications, and commit a large-scale air campaign, Operation Rolling Thunder, followed by a land invasion in 1965. American sentiment was extremely positive at the time, as they demanded the end of a "losing streak" to Communism, and at the time did not look too deeply into the origins of the war (Pieper, 2012).

The Invasion of Afghanistan was originally firmly grounded in Jus Ad Bellum. The US had been attacked on September 11th by Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda was based out of Afghanistan and had been harbored by the Taliban. The US had just cause, as it had been directly attacked on US

soil. It had probability of success, as it had limited objectives of finding and capturing Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. The response was proportional, and it was a last resort, as the US cannot negotiate with terrorists (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Where the Afghanistan War started to run off the rails was with the mission creep and lack of clearly defined objectives. By the middle of 2003, the US had mostly subdued Al Qaeda, and the Taliban were on the run. The US became enamored with nation building and suffered because of it. Instead of a limited objective, it became a peace-keeping mission and focused on propping up the cardboard Afghan National Government (Gawthorpe, 2021). The US was willfully blind to the intelligence that the Afghans would never accept a unified government over their tribal culture, and that this would lead to Taliban freedom of movement and control in many parts of the country. The faulty logic was seeing the Afghan culture as less developed, and therefore a moldable slate that the US could shape to conform to Western values. This hubris would create an intellectual gap that was divorced from reality. The US was looking for information that confirmed its own bias and would create a self-reinforcing feedback loop that would allow the sunk-cost fallacy to ensure that the US continued to pour more and more resources into “fixing” Afghanistan (Gawthorpe).

Quagmire

In both wars, the months turned into years, which turned into decades. Vietnam was the longest war in US history with US involvement lasting 19 years, until the Afghanistan War stretched even longer lasting nearly 20 full years. In both conflicts, the civilian and military leadership were not willing to do what was necessary to win, only to manage the wars so that they would not lose. In both wars, civilian and military leadership lied or ignored facts to cover up incompetence, magical thinking, and corruption. In both cases, this turned into a disaster. Indeed, as the wars dragged on, it became a point of defending national honor, to create the perception that the sacrifices were not in vain. No one wanted to admit that the window for success in Vietnam or Afghanistan had been missed, and even fewer wanted to admit the futility of the operations, and that the wars could no longer hold up to the scrutiny of Just War Theory. If this was ever admitted, it would forever be a national sorrow and a stain on US leadership (Patterson, 2018). Few people have had the clarity of thought and observation on this matter than LTG H.R. McMaster. McMaster wrote in his book, *Dereliction of Duty*, about the abject incompetence and deceitfulness of the Johnson administration, and the cowardice and weak will of the flag officers on the Joint Chiefs of Staff to stand up to the ethical failures of the Johnson administration. (McMaster, 1997). McMaster states:

The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of *The New York Times*, or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war. ... [It was] a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisors. (McMaster 1997).

Indeed, the irony is that McMaster wrote those words as a cautionary tale, and he himself became a part of it in his own experience serving as a senior leader.

McMaster served as a commanding general, under President Obama, and later as the National Security Advisor to President Trump, McMaster had opportunities to speak up when he

felt that the American people were getting the wrong end of the deal with the never-ending operations in Afghanistan, with no clearly defined strategy to win (Lozada, 2017). President Trump surrounded himself with honorable and reputable generals such as McMaster, Mattis, and Kelly. However, like Johnson, Trump tried to use the veneer of military credibility to cover up ineptitude and lies. Like Johnson before him, Trump expected the generals to burn their credibility to prop up a civilian command staff that was lying to the American people, on multiple fronts, not just about the actual conditions in Afghanistan, but on nearly every major issue including Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran (Lozada). The freewheeling and fact-free nature of President Trump directly clashed with the ethical prism and moral responsibility that McMaster espoused. This resulted in a difficult relationship, as McMaster viewed his duty as a soldier, to present facts as they were, and to give non-politically motivated advice, to be of a higher imperative than as a stooge political appointee. Indeed, McMaster's loyalty to his morals earned him an unceremonious firing by tweet (Elliot, 2018).

Disastrous Retreat

The final parallel between Vietnam and Afghanistan is the precipitous collapse of the allied government and a rapid and hasty evacuation that left many allies holding the bag. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese collapsed the Southern Army all the way back to the capital of Saigon, and as tanks were rolling into the capital, the US executed Operation Frequent Wind and evacuated as many Americans and South Vietnamese as they could before the Communists seized the city (Sobers, 2020). In Afghanistan, President Trump brokered a deal with the Taliban to withdraw from Afghanistan, effectively selling out the Afghan National Government, which was not a party to the deal. President Biden, who wished to wash his hands of Afghanistan and be done with the war, was all too eager to follow through on the retreat (Priess, 2021). Despite repeated intelligence warnings that the Taliban were rapidly growing in the strength, and that the Afghans, US allies, were being pushed to the brink, as province after province fell like dominoes. The civilian leadership was engaged in magical thinking and did not believe or did not listen to the dire warnings of imminent collapse, and complete takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban (Priess). The Taliban closed in on Kabul so rapidly, that the US was at the mercy of the Taliban and had to stage the largest ever evacuation of non-combatants from the Hamid Karzai Airport (Votel, 2021). This was a final humiliation to cap off twenty years of operations in Afghanistan.

Both the South Vietnamese and the Afghans failed the "self-help" test outlined in John Stuart Mill's essay "A Few Words on Non-Intervention" and Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars*. The self-help test would show whether a government can stand on its own, and this would guide whether intervention would help or ultimately cause harm. It turned out that neither government was strong enough to stand without US backing. Whether it was weakened by endemic corruption or a lack of political will, the Afghan government could not muster the strength to resist the Taliban just as the South Vietnamese could not resist the Northern Communists (Rosenthal, 2021). As Walzer stated in his book, foreign intervention cannot substitute for self-determination: "Freedom of a political community can be won only by members of that community." (Walzer, 2015). The similarity between the fall of South Vietnam and the fall of Kabul are unmistakable in this regard, complete with the scenes of collapse and chaos as the last helicopters left Saigon in 1975 and the last jets left Kabul in 2021. The ultimate

ethical failure of the US was not the decision to leave, but in how it accomplished this goal. The failure was in its initial execution. The US had a moral and ethical duty to the allies left behind, and it failed to fulfill the entirety of the promise, as thousands were left behind to fend against a Taliban government that would sign their death warrant (Rosenthal, 2021).

Restoring the Warrior Ethos

Like the 1970's, the early 2020's has been a period of cultural malaise and decline, accentuated by a humiliating loss of a long war. McMaster made this acute observation:

In the 1970s multiple crises, including stagflation, oil shortages, the Watergate affair, the first resignation of an American president, and the 444-days-long hostage crisis that followed the Iranian Revolution added to the trauma of a lost war. Pessimism pervaded. The experiences of recent years seem to rhyme with those of the 1970s. The traumas of a pandemic, a recession, vitriolic partisan political divisions, social divisions laid bare by George Floyd's murder and the violent aftermath, an assault on the Capitol, and false claims of widespread election fraud reduced confidence in our democratic institutions and processes. The erosion of trust and America's shrinking confidence are diminishing the trust that binds warriors to one another and to society at a time when dangers to our security are increasing. (McMaster, 2021)

Indeed, military members are not the only ones who have been traumatized by the government's unethical behavior, but the general American populace as well. This slow decline has left our culture in a moral rot that is threatening to tear the country to pieces. Every administration that has presided over the war in Afghanistan has let their policy be overridden by politics, and the American people and the US military have suffered for it. In his essay, "Preserving the Warrior Ethos" McMaster offers hope and a way forward for the US to pull itself out of this difficult pit of ethical blight: "Leaders must also explain to the American people the nature of the wars and conflicts in which their sons and daughters fight. Citizens need to know what is at stake and what is the strategy to achieve an outcome worthy of costs, risks, and sacrifices." (McMaster, 2021). Like the radically different 1980's with its reforms and changes to how the US conducts itself, the remainder of the 2020's can be a turning point. The US must restore its credibility on the world stage, and intelligence and facts on the ground cannot be ignored in favor of political expediency. Men and women of strong moral character, and senior military and civilian leaders who are willing to listen in good faith must take this chance to renew the Warrior Ethos and restore the prestige of the US (Rosenthal, 2021).

Synthesis

The echoes of Vietnam pervaded the war in Afghanistan. The Just Cause eventually gave way to mission creep and quagmire, with corruption and lies to the American people creating doubt in the government, and the sellout of US allies and the American troops. Ethical failures of senior leaders to stand up and present the intelligence as it was and not through a political lens created long protracted wars that destroyed US credibility. With the destruction of US credibility came cultural malaise and unrest that cast doubt on the US' global leadership. As before in the post-Vietnam era, the post-Afghanistan era can be a chance to renew the Warrior Ethos and to

instill ethical behavior in government and senior leadership. All is not lost, and the US must reassert its core principles and rediscover the bedrock values that guide this country.

References

- Council on Foreign Relations. (2021). *The U.S. War in Afghanistan 1999 – 2021 The Taliban surged back to power two decades after U.S.-led forces toppled its regime in what led to the United States' longest war*. cfr.org. Retrieved November 28, 2021, from <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>
- D'Anieri, P. J. (2021). *International Politics: Power and Purpose in Global Affairs*. Cengage.
- Elliot, P. (2018, March 23). Donald Trump Just Hired John Bolton. Here's Why That Makes Some Nervous. *Time Magazine*. <https://time.com/5212129/john-bolton-hr-mcmaster-donald-trump/>
- Gawthorpe, A. (2021, August 18). *Afghanistan and the Real Vietnam Analogy The war in Vietnam showed the abject failure of nation-building – and the imperial logic behind such efforts. But the U.S. repeated its mistake in Afghanistan*. thediplomat.com. Retrieved November 27, 2021, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/afghanistan-and-the-real-vietnam-analogy/>
- Lozada, C. (2017, May 19). 20 years ago, H.R. McMaster wrote a cautionary tale. Now he risks becoming one. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/book-party/wp/2017/05/19/20-years-ago-h-r-mcmaster-wrote-a-cautionary-tale-now-he-risks-becoming-one/>
- McMaster, H. R. (1997). *Dereliction of duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the lies that led to Vietnam*. Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

- McMaster, H. R. (2021, November 15). Preserving the Warrior Ethos It is corroded, and the necessary restorative work belongs to us all. *National Review*.
https://www.nationalreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/xml_20211115_McMaster-3.html
- Morris, E. (Director). (2003). *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* [Film]. Sony Picture Classics.
- Patterson, E. (2018, April 23). Just War & National Honor: The Case of Vietnam. *Providence Magazine*. <https://providencemag.com/2018/04/just-war-national-honor-the-case-of-vietnam/>
- Pieper, M. (2012). *Containment and the Cold War: Reexamining the Doctrine of Containment as a Grand Strategy Driving US Cold War Interventions*. *Inquires Journal*. Vol. 4, No. 8, Pg 1-4.
- Priess, D. (2021, August 26). *Afghanistan, Policy Choices, and Claims of Intelligence Failure*. *lawfareblog.com*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from
<https://www.lawfareblog.com/afghanistan-policy-choices-and-claims-intelligence-failure>
- Rosenthal, J. H. (2021, August 23). *The Ethics of Exit from Afghanistan*. *carnegiecouncil.org*. Retrieved November 28, 2021, from
https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/the-ethics-of-exit-from-afghanistan
- Sobers, C. (2020) *J. William Fullbright, the Contested Legacies of the American Revolution, and the War in Vietnam*. *Modern American History*. Vol. 3, Iss. 1. Pgs. 27-45.
- Votel, J. L. (2021, August 27). Evacuating is the most demanding mission of 20 years in Afghanistan. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/569594-evacuating-is-the-most-demanding-mission-of-20-years-in-afghanistan?rl=1>
- Walzer, M. (2015). *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. Basic Books.